

Disrupting an Insurgent Bedroom Community: *Decentralized Operations in a Terrorist Support Zone*

by Captain Gregory R. Mitchell

The asymmetric battlefield of Iraq has forced armor and cavalry units to develop new methods outside the scope of traditional roles on the high-intensity battlefield. What has evolved is a highly decentralized platoon and section fight for intelligence.

Following Operation Restoring Rights in September 2005, a single tank platoon, from H Company, 2d Squadron, 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment, conducted security and reconnaissance operations in the vicinity of the Sunni Turkoman enclaves of Muhullabiya and Sheikh Ibraheem, 20 kilometers (km) southeast of Tal Afar. The platoon managed its battlespace from Dixie House, an outpost on the city limits of Muhullabiya, named for the strategic route, Alternate Supply Route (ASR) Dixie, that it overwatched. The site was more than a 50km road march from its company headquarters, sister platoons, and Iraqi army partners at Fort Tal Afar. The company's 1st platoon was given three tasks: conduct route security operations along a 30km stretch of an important coalition and Iraqi supply route; conduct area reconnaissance and security operations in support of the October consti-

tutional referendum and December elections; and disrupt anti-Iraqi forces (AIF) cells operating in the area of operation (AO) to prepare for a future permanent Iraqi army presence in Muhullabiya.

H Company had a strong combined operational relationship with its Iraqi army counterpart 1st Battalion, 1st Brigade, 3d Iraqi Army Division, headquartered at Fort Tal Afar. The Iraqi and American units shared the same battlespace. However, the Iraqi battalion was spread thin, conducting security operations in the city of Tal Afar and east of the city along route Santa Fe, preventing the battalion from dedicating a permanent presence in Muhullabiya. The Iraqi army battalion surged to support election site security in Muhullabiya and Sheikh Ibraheem for a week at a time during October and December. For a four-month period, red platoon was forced to develop a unilateral strategy for reconnaissance and security operations that would successfully shape the AO for establishing a permanent Iraqi army presence in Muhullabiya by January 2006.

The culture environment of Tal Afar and surrounding towns is unique in Iraq, dom-

inated by Sunni Turkoman tribes that are ethnically and linguistically distinct from their Kurdish and Arab neighbors. The Turkoman culture and its language share Arab and Turkish influences, dating back to the former Ottoman Empire's dominance of Iraq.

In recent decades, the Sunni Turkoman benefited from Baathist rule, and like many other Sunni tribal groups, found favoritism in Saddam's military and security forces. Although pro-regime, the Turkoman displayed a high degree of cultural resistance to Saddam's program of Arabization in northern Iraq. Arabs, who the regime encouraged to resettle in Tal Afar, assimilated to the distinct local culture, adopting the Turkoman language and intermarrying with the local clans. The new Iraqi government recently gave a nod to the independent Turkoman identity when the ministry of education sanctioned the use of the Turkoman language in local schools.

Despite new political and cultural freedoms, the economic and political changes resulting from Operation Iraqi Freedom have fueled a Sunni Turkoman-based



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insurgency opposed to Shiah ascendancy in local and national politics, as well as the United States' military presence. The Turkoman people are deeply divided along Shiah and Sunni lines, and as a result of tribal feuds, are a source of much of the violence in Tal Afar.

While the insurgency in Tal Afar is largely homegrown, the city's close proximity to Syria makes it an important transit point for foreign terrorist funding and influence. The nearby towns of Muhullabiya and Sheikh Ibraheem are important waypoints for Sunni Turkoman insurgents operating between Tal Afar and the contentious Turkoman enclaves of Mosul. The ethnically homogenous composition of Muhullabiya and Sheikh Ibraheem provides an important support zone for a distinctly Turkoman front of the Iraqi insurgency that does not easily find support or safe haven among neighboring Arab tribes. The Sunni Turkoman towns of Muhullabiya and Sheikh Ibraheem are key terrain, which Iraqi security and coalition forces must dominate to defeat terrorism in Tal Afar and Mosul. This endstate will allow political development within the greater Turkoman community, which could result in its pacification and enfranchisement in the new Iraqi political and economic landscape.

Combined coalition and Iraqi security operations inside Tal Afar have placed enormous pressure on the enemy to find freedom of maneuver and conduct operations in outlying support zones. In the weeks following Operation Restoring Rights, Muhullabiya and Sheikh Ibraheem remained an enemy safe haven for planning, reconsolidation, weapons storage, and transit. Two important insurgent leaders in the Surai district, brothers who hailed from Muhullabiya, had reportedly withdrawn to their tribal support zone in Muhullabiya and Sheikh Ibraheem to reconsolidate and plan future terrorist operations.

Valuable human intelligence and reconnaissance of enemy weapons caches con-



vinced platoon and company leaders to maintain "Dixie House" after the elections and widen the scope of H Company's operations in the AO. Dixie House overwatched key terrain at the intersection of routes Reno and Dixie. The house provided clear fields of fire and observation along a 2km stretch of ASR Reno, which had previously served as an enemy improvised explosive device (IED) kill zone. Earlier in the year, elements of H Company had engaged and destroyed terrorists emplacing an IED on this stretch of the route and the resulting high-speed chase led them to pass within 50 meters of the future site of Dixie House. This new platoon outpost was less than 1km from the Muhullabiya city limits and its strategic proximity would facilitate coalition support of a future permanent Iraqi army presence within the town.

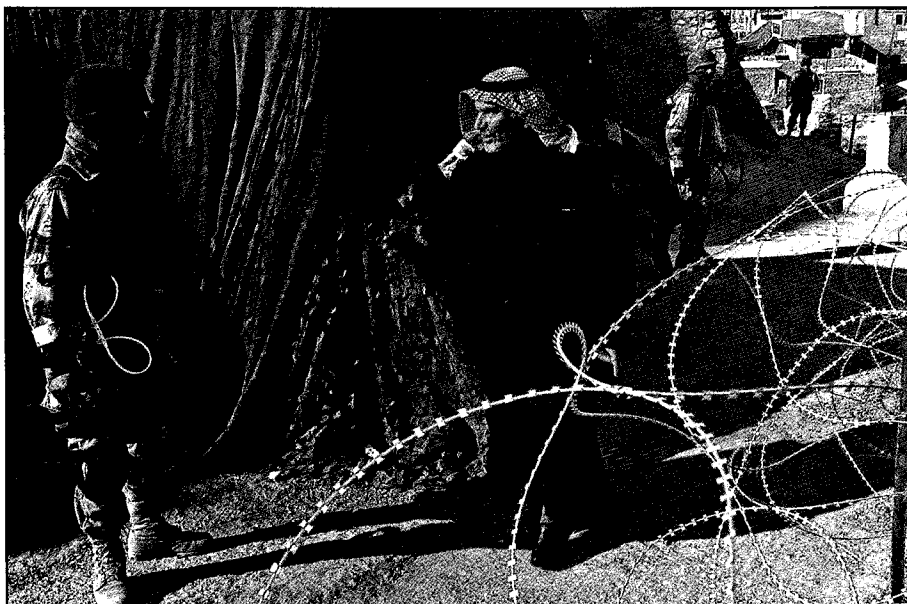
Red platoon's mission was to develop a highly effective strategy to balance route security of ASR Reno with aggressive reconnaissance for cache sites and human intelligence leads on terrorist activities in the insurgent support zone. Enemy tactics, terrain, available combat power, and isolation from adjacent units drove the platoon's strategy for area security and reconnaissance operations. Command and control and force protection at Dixie House required a full tank section, leaving the remaining eight-man section for offensive operations outside the wire. Troops available for mounted offensive operations presented a serious challenge. Both Muhullabiya and Sheikh Ibraheem are densely populated and their medieval streets are extremely restrictive for both tracked and wheeled vehicles. Regular patrols of the inner reaches of the city were impractical.

Aggressive counter-cache reconnaissance in agricultural areas surrounding

Muhullabiya and Sheikh Ibraheem was the mission of choice to focus the platoon's offensive reconnaissance, as well as nightly counter-IED patrols on route Reno. On 15 October, during polling site security operations, H Company's headquarters platoon discovered a large weapons cache, 5km west of Muhullabiya, hidden in one of the area's large wells. The hidden cache included 125 155mm artillery rounds and more than 175 other pieces of ordnance, as well as rockets, fuses, trinitrotoluene (TNT), and several ready-made IED initiating devices, which were subsequently reduced; but the enemy's local cache arrangements had been exposed.

Prior to, or immediately after, the fall of Baghdad, Baath party loyalists and local landowners had conspired to move ordnance from the nearby Badush Ammunition Supply Point and stockpile it in the enormous dirt berms surrounding the local wells. Red platoon's subsequent reconnaissance revealed that six of the area's 36 wells contained weapons, explosives, and other materials of intelligence value. The enemy could not react immediately to the platoon's discoveries — the caches were destroyed.

Despite its tribal ties and close proximity to Tal Afar, Muhullabiya is part of the greater Mosul municipality. Muhullabiya had been without a city manager or police force since the terrorist offensive in November 2004, which toppled Mosul's city government and security forces. On 19 September 2005, within days of the conclusion of Operation Restoring Rights in Tal Afar, the mayor of Mosul appointed a new city manager for the town of Muhullabiya. Red platoon's senior noncommissioned officer (NCO) cautiously proceeded to develop a working relationship with this new city man-



ager, who was a prominent figure in the local Sunni Turkoman Hamdany clan. Refined, articulate, and politically savvy, the new city manager made an excellent partner for the local election site security mission.

The city manager's personal story was similar to that of many local political figures in new Iraq: he carried a card that identified him as a former prisoner of conscience; his father had been executed by the former regime; and he claimed to have worked with a human-rights organization in Baghdad with close ties to the Americans and the former coalition provisional authority. Despite his relatively young age and sharp western dress, he was widely recognized as the local senior sheikh of the Hamdany tribe, a clan known to widely support the insurgency. Through multiple meetings and endless cups of sweet tea, red platoon's senior NCO learned that all politics in Muhullabiya were family politics. The new city manager and the tribal elder, or mokhtar, of Sheikh Ibraheem were cousins and competitors for local authority. It also became apparent in coming weeks that both men were close relatives of the area's most notorious insurgent brothers.

Red platoon approached its area reconnaissance with tactics comparable to community-based policing. They regularly patrolled the local farms, stopping to speak with locals, learning their names, occupations, and family ties in the area. The citizens grew more comfortable with the platoon's reconnaissance and security patrols. The city manager claimed that locals derived a sense of security from the unobtrusive American presence.

On 26 November, red platoon's patrol approached five men at a farmhouse who greeted them with tea and conversation.

A search of the small farmhouse revealed nothing unusual; however, the experienced NCO noted that the men wore short-length dish dasha-style clothing, typically worn by men from the contentious Surai district of Tal Afar. There were no women or children present and no satellite dish. The senior NCO was suspicious of the house and a second search conducted the following day in the residents' absence, turned up an insurgent explosives manual detailing chemical recipes for manufacturing bombs from agricultural chemicals. They confiscated the manual and quickly exfiltrated the site, hoping their second reconnaissance of the home would go unnoticed. The platoon returned the following day and found the site abandoned.

On 28 November, the platoon continued its reconnaissance 3kms south of the abandoned farm. They approached a similar farmhouse and witnessed two men attempting to flee the site in a pickup truck. The vehicle was intercepted and the senior NCO recognized the man who made him tea two days earlier. The Turkoman nervously and emphatically denied that they had ever met, but the senior NCO recognized the man's unmistakable light-blue eyes. Both suspects were detained and a search of the house revealed an extensive explosives laboratory and weapons cache. The lab contained a library of bound books and notebooks in English and Arabic, detailing the manufacture of improvised explosives and poisons. Several caches were discovered within 200 meters of the lab, containing chemistry reference books, Pyrex-style chemical lab wear, industrial and military chemical protective gear, military explosives, and IED-making materials. Both men were detained and eventually sent to Abu Ghurayb. Local sources would later claim

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that one of the five men that the senior NCO met on the 26th was one of the infamous local terrorist brothers who graduated from Saddam's Military Officer Academy in Baghdad and served as a first lieutenant in the former army's special forces. The infamous terrorist was not one of the two men detained and locals would later indicate that he fled the area following the discovery of his weapons lab.

A more detailed search of both farmhouses revealed drums containing chemical benzene, ammonium nitrate, sodium fluoride, arsenic trioxide, insecticides, and other unidentified compounds. Combat engineers conducted controlled detonations on both sites, destroying both structures and sending an effective public message that severely disrupted local terrorist operations. Sources in Muhullabiya and Sheikh Ibraheem revealed that landowners were concerned enough to hire guards to deter insurgents from using their properties. The locals now feared losing their livelihood for their involvement with terrorism. The famous brothers were rumored to have left the area to conduct operations elsewhere in Iraq.

The December national election was greeted with enthusiasm in Muhullabiya and Sheikh Ibraheem. Nearly 4,000 citizens voted at two polling sites. The city manager and his newly reconstituted 47-man police force fully cooperated with H Company and the Iraqi army to secure the polling sites and patrol the town. Following the election, H Company implemented a work program to employ local men to clean streets and repair local roads. The platoon secured ground until elements of the 1st Brigade, 3d Iraqi Army Division arrived in January 2006 to establish a permanent security presence. Local intelligence sources consistently delivered complaints about the coalition and Iraqi presence being too small and intermittent to protect citizens from criminals who threatened their families and property.

The desired endstate for operations in Muhullabiya and Sheikh Ibraheem was to put in place a permanent Iraqi army

presence to conduct area reconnaissance and security operations. This endstate was achieved when 2d Battalion, 1st Brigade, 3d Iraqi Army Division descended on Muhullabiya in mid-January 2006. A major cordon and search operation was executed by four Iraqi infantry companies, while H Company's 1st and 3d platoons provided support by fire. Enablers provided by U.S. forces, which included a tactical psychological operations team, rotary wing aerial reconnaissance, and a fixed wing show of force, enhanced the Iraqi battalion's ability to establish its authority in the town during the operation. The plan for dismounted maneuver was entirely Iraqi and H Company's mounted support was tailored to meet the Iraqi army commander's concept.

Coalition units had previously conducted large-scale cordon and search operations but had failed to confiscate AK47 assault rifles that could be found in nearly every home. The Iraqi army battalion commander considered the weapons a serious threat to future operations in the town. The vast majority of weapons were issued to the population by the Baath party prior to the fall of Baghdad as part of Saddam's strategy for resistance to occupation. Each rifle in Muhullabiya bore Saddam-era arms room markings on the buttstock and receiver. H Company and 1st Battalion, Iraqi army, had established an extremely effective policy of confiscation in their combined areas of operations. During Operation Restoring Rights, the mayor of Tal Afar ordered Iraqi security forces to confiscate all weapons and disband the Sunni and Shiah tribal militias. The Iraqi army's 2d Battalion would follow the same strategy in Muhullabiya, confiscating all automatic weapons and licensing them to a select few cooperative residents. This greatly enhanced the Iraqi army's freedom of maneuver and operation in the contentious town.

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Despite the prevalence of AK47s, the Iraq war is presently an asymmetric fight due to the coalition's superior firepower and protection. The enemy in the Tal Afar area of operations is elusive and engages U.S. forces with effective standoff. As the coalition transfers authority to Iraqi security forces, the fight will become increasingly symmetric. Criminal elements' weapons capabilities will approach parity with those of the Iraqi army and the police. Iraqi security forces are lightly armed and most units are not equipped with armored vehicles.

In the absence of U.S. tanks, armored personnel carriers, and aerial reconnaissance, direct fire ambushes will increase, presenting a serious challenge to the security forces' ability to maintain security and stability. The Iraqi army in Muhullabiya is expanding an effective strategy of AK47 confiscation and weapons licensing initiated in Tal Afar during Operation Restoring Rights, which should be emulated throughout Iraq.

The Iraqi army commander was challenged by the questionable reliability and loyalties of the Muhullabiya police. All the force's officers and patrolmen were from the local area and many were reportedly tied to criminal and terrorist activities. The Iraqi army commander met this challenge by effectively and immediately incorporating the police into his daily patrols. He established the army's supremacy by assigning two policemen to each eight-man squad for combined foot patrols. This denied the police the

ability to appear impartial or noncomplicit with the new army's presence. The commander's approach to combine police and army patrolling was effective in forging a working partnership, despite the language barrier and traditional ethnic rivalry between the predominately Kurdish soldiers and the Sunni Turkoman police.

Establishing effective Iraqi security forces is the decisive operation of this war. Recent operations in Muhullabiya demonstrate the effectiveness a conventional maneuver unit can achieve when employed in highly decentralized reconnaissance and security operations. These shaping operations have forged a modest level of cooperation between the Iraqi army, police, and local governments that will continue to disrupt terrorist activity, and as it strengthens, defeat the enemy in this important terrorist support zone.



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